

Thomas Birch's 'Weekly Letter' (1741-1766): correspondence and history in the mid-eighteenth-century Royal Society

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Summary

Thomas Birch (1705-1766), Secretary of the Royal Society from 1752 to 1765, and Philip Yorke, second Earl of Hardwicke (1720-1790), wrote a 'Weekly Letter' from 1741 to 1766, an unpublished correspondence of 680 letters in the British Library (Additional Mss 35396-400). The article examines the dimensions and purposes of this correspondence, an important conduit of information for the influential coterie of the 'Hardwicke circle' gathered around Yorke in the Royal Society. It explores the writers' self-conception of the correspondence, which was expressed in deliberately archaic categories of seventeenth-century news exchange, such as the newsletter, aviso and a-la-main. It shows how the letter writers negotiated their difference in status through the discourse of friendship, and concludes that the 'Weekly Letter' constituted for the correspondents a form of private knowledge, restricted in circulation to their discrete group, and as such unlike the open and networked model of enlightenment science.

Main Document

The 'Weekly Letter' of Thomas Birch (1705-1766), Secretary of the Royal Society (1752-1765), and Philip Yorke, second Earl of Hardwicke (1720-1790) is an extensive and unpublished manuscript correspondence undertaken from 1741 to 1766, offering an unusually detailed and candid prospect on the intellectual culture of mid-eighteenth-century London. Now preserved in five volumes of the Hardwicke Papers in the British Library, the 'Weekly Letter' comprises 680 letters written by Birch (428 letters) and Yorke (252 letters).¹ Birch's contribution, which Yorke described as a 'weekly despatch' of 'literary & political speculations', was an almost unique enterprise in this period, consisting of a regular weekly bifolium letter describing the news of London from the political, literary and scientific worlds.² The 'Weekly Letter' has frequently been consulted by historians and literary critics as a source of information: one, for example has complimented Birch as 'a seasoned observer of the press community', and another has mined the letter for information about ministerial politics in the 1740s.³ In the history of science, David Miller has proposed that the 'Weekly

Letter' gives 'a unique insight into the activities and interests' of Yorke's 'Hardwicke circle' in the Royal Society, a coterie who held high office in, and influenced the proceedings of, that institution.⁴ However, despite this scholarly interest, the 'Weekly Letter' has not in itself been the subject of extended analysis. This article explores how Birch and Yorke understood their own correspondence, examining how they described its activities through a series of commanding metaphors and historical analogies. It shows how they adapted inherited forms of correspondence to negotiate the problem of scientific communication in the polite world between persons of different status.

Correspondence was central to the organization of scientific knowledge in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: Paul Dibon has suggested that the establishment, maintenance and encouragement of correspondence was as important as learned journals and other large-scale publication projects (encyclopedias, dictionaries) to the circulation of knowledge in the sphere of natural philosophy. Letters were valued as a method to disseminate information, including results and conclusions of experimental work, research in progress, and recent publications.⁵ The practice of letter writing was accorded high prestige in eighteenth-century culture, considered a polite and sociable form of writing closely associated with the face-to-face gentlemanly practices of conversation and civility, and as such, understood as an accomplishment worthy of cultivation and refinement.⁶ The exchange of letters, and the maintenance of an extensive correspondence with a wide range of fellow scholars, was accordingly important within the geographically-distributed community of scholars identified as the Republic of Letters. Evidence of this corresponding spirit is found in the large scale archives of correspondence maintained by key figures in the early Royal Society, such as Robert Boyle (1627-1691), Henry Oldenburg (1615?-1677) and James Jurin (1684-1750).⁷ The publication of these major correspondences in recent decades has made this primary material more generally available, and has prompted further studies of the material and textual culture of the letter in the history of science. Part of the 'archival turn', correspondence has provided central evidence of the role of sociability, civility, and the discourse of politeness in the foundation of scientific institutions.⁸

Birch and Yorke's correspondence conforms in important ways to the expectations of a *commerce de lettres*, defined by Anne Goldgar as a regular arranged correspondence for the exchange of scholarly information, and a central activity of the communication system of the Republic of Letters.⁹ Goldgar argues that a *commerce de lettres* was founded on a sense of obligation that bound distant scholars into a communal network, in which participants were expected to perform acts of mutual assistance, which would be performed without commercial compensation, within a discourse of politeness and an ethic of cooperation, with the primary objective an amicable friendship between the persons involved. Aspects of these characteristics are certainly found in the 'Weekly Letter', but with significant differences to be explored below: notably, the extended cultural range of the topics, ranging over politics and literature, as

well as natural philosophy, and the regular weekly rhythm of the exchange. Goldgar's account understands the duties of reciprocal exchange within the theory of the gift articulated by the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, who argued that the gift implies three obligations: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to reciprocate.¹⁰ With Mauss in mind, it might be said that correspondents establish obligations by sending and receiving letters: each letter beseeches its reply. In Goldgar's conception of the Republic of Letters, all participants consider themselves equal, with status being earned by scholarly service, rather than being dependent on wealth or birth. Birch and Yorke, the cleric and the nobleman, repeatedly reiterate the polite and equal reciprocity of their exchange, but also continually confront the irreconcilably different worlds of wealth, status and privilege that they inhabit. Negotiating how their relationship might be considered a friendship rather than that of a master and servant is an important sub-theme of the 'Weekly Letter'.

Birch and Yorke's own imaginative conceptions of their practice in the 'Weekly Letter', are important to understanding its role and concerns. In their conduct of the 'Weekly Letter', they had no explicit contract or regulatory agreement, suggesting that it conforms to the discourse of reciprocal obligation of the Republic of Letters. Nonetheless, the metaphors and circumlocutions used by Birch and Yorke to describe the conduct of their *commerce de lettres* effectively conceptualize and manage their relationship. This 'control information', often located in the opening and closing salutations, and sometimes quite literally in the margins of the letters, constitutes all the contemporary information about their purpose in the 'Weekly Letter'. It is significant, in this way, that in their own reflections on it, Birch and Yorke described the 'Weekly Letter' within the discourse of what is now known as a 'newsletter'. The seventeenth-century practice of the manuscript 'newsletter' was a subgenre that had evolved to distribute foreign and domestic news amongst the political elite. Compared to the scientific *commerce des lettres*, focused closely on matters of importance amongst natural philosophers and their scholarly institutions, the adoption of the newsletter metaphor allowed Birch and Yorke an expanded range of topics.

The term 'manuscript newsletter' in this sense refers both to a form of letter writing, and a practice for its production and dissemination: an organized and regular correspondence dedicated to the dissemination of news, intelligence, and other information. Harold Love has described how a newsletter writer established 'a network of customers, who would pay a subscription to receive the letters', employing clerks 'to duplicate a standardized form of the letter'. Accordingly, Love locates the practice within seventeenth-century scribal culture, established to allow 'country gentlemen' to receive 'news and political information on a regular basis from a town informant'. Newsletters adopted a typical or 'common format', 'a whole or half-sheet bifolium with the first three pages written on and the last left blank for addressing.' In this format, manuscript newsletters remained familiar and genteel: Love notes that 'the fiction was usually maintained that the letter was a personal communication between

gentlemen'.¹¹ Joad Raymond and others have argued that manuscript newsletters were central to the culture of news in seventeenth-century Britain and Europe.¹² The Secretaries of State, first John Thurloe (1616-1668) under Oliver Cromwell, and later Joseph Williamson (1633-1701) in the reign of Charles II, developed the newsletter into a complex and highly evolved system. In the 1650s and 1660s, the Secretaries of State systematized the practice of newsletter writing. Through the Paper Office, the Secretary of State received weekly letters from a network of domestic agents: the clerks of the office collated relevant news, added the Secretary's own information (such as official appointments and parliamentary proceedings), and produced a standard newsletter. The office then employed a bank of clerks to produce copies, as many as three hundred a week. The official correspondents (agents) were paid in kind, receiving a copy of the Secretary's newsletter, while other eminent figures among the nobility, the military and the merchants, could purchase copies by subscription. Subscriptions were sufficient to defray the expenses of the whole system.¹³ As an editor and historian of seventeenth-century news culture, Birch was unusually aware of the legacy of the manuscript newsletter. By the mid-eighteenth century, when Birch and Yorke undertook the 'Weekly Letter', Goldgar argues the functions of the newsletter (*nouvelles littéraires*) had been taken over by the journal, a printed periodical offering a summary of news and publications. 'Although literary journals did not necessarily solve the problem of the need to exchange news, they greatly supplemented and indeed in some ways replaced the *commerce de lettres* as a means of disseminating information quickly'.¹⁴

Within these conceptions of the *commerce de lettres* and the newsletter are significantly different models of scientific communication. In Goldgar's terms, a newsletter is undertaken within the bonds of service, either mercenary or feudal, while a *commerce de lettres* follows the egalitarian model of reciprocal obligation. As a form of communication, the *commerce de lettres* is essentially open and networked: although letters are sent to named individuals, it is expected that they will be shared by other scholars, such as members or fellows of learned societies. In the case of the Royal Society, Henry Oldenburg, one of the first two secretaries of the society (1660-1677), had formalized the role of correspondence as a method of collecting and evaluating scientific information. He further established the letter archive to preserve and collate the correspondence, making it available to such fellows as wished to consult it. A selected portion of the correspondence was thereafter disseminated publicly through their print publication in the *Philosophical Transactions*. The Royal Society became an 'intellectual clearing house' for scientific information.¹⁵ Michael Hunter has stressed 'the real effectiveness of this correspondence as an agency for the promotion of the new philosophy throughout Europe'.¹⁶ As Secretary to the Royal Society from 1752-1765, Birch was at the hub of its scientific communications. Even before rising to that role, an early achievement of his career was his employment in 1740-1741 by the Royal Society to organize its uncatalogued early papers and letters, so that they might be both preserved and consulted.¹⁷ Birch, in short, was unusually well versed in the use of correspondence to facilitate scientific communication. By

contrast, the manuscript newsletter, as practiced by the Secretaries of State, was distinct for the closed and even secret nature of its intelligence, available only to a discrete coterie, who were charged with keeping this information secret. The 'Weekly Letter' between Birch and Yorke was similarly closed and secretive, available only to Yorke's Hardwicke circle.

The inception of the 'Weekly Letter': form, format, range

Thomas Birch (1705-1766) was born the son of a Quaker coffee-mill maker in St George's Court Clerkenwell. After an education in local Quaker schools, he sought a career in the Anglican Church in 1726. He married Hannah Cox, the daughter of the curate of St Botolph without Bishopsgate in 1728, but both his wife and their son died in 1729. Having been baptized in 1730 and ordained in 1731, Birch was presented to the vicarage of Ulting in Essex in 1732 through the influence of the statesman Sir Philip Yorke (subsequently Lord Chancellor and created the first earl of Hardwicke in 1754). The patronage of the Yorke family was crucial to Birch's subsequent career. Birch was appointed tutor to Sir Philip Yorke's oldest son, Phillip Yorke (hereafter called simply Yorke). Birch's skills as a scholar were recognized when he was appointed one of the chief editors of the *General Dictionary, Historical and Critical*, an expanded ten-volume edition of Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (1697) that appeared between 1734 to 1741. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1734. Birch had an important role in Royal Society reforms from the early 1740s, a period of reorganization and transition.¹⁸ Under Yorke's patronage Birch rose to prominence in the metropolitan intellectual elite, as Secretary of the Royal Society (1752-1765) and as a foundation Trustee of the British Museum, amongst other positions. Birch undertook, when Secretary, a reform of the process by which correspondence was assessed and validated by the Royal Society for publication, by instituting a Committee of Papers in 1752, effectively introducing a form of peer review.¹⁹ He published his most widely cited work, *The History of the Royal Society* in 1756.²⁰ During this period he also found preferment in the church, through the influence of Sir Philip Yorke (the father), acquiring a series of influential and rich livings in London that provided him with the time and income to pursue literary and historical work.

In 1740, when the 'Weekly Letter' began, Birch was thirty-five years of age, while Philip Yorke was a generation younger, at twenty years old. Yorke lived at his father's townhouse in St James's Square, and, from 1740, at the family seat of Wimpole Hall in Cambridgeshire. He had just come down from Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and was the holder of a lucrative Exchequer sinecure courtesy of his father. In May 1740 he had married Lady Jemima Campbell, *suo jure* Marchioness de Grey, a well-educated and wealthy eighteen-year old heiress, who was granddaughter of the Duke of Kent. As part of his wife's inheritance, he acquired a substantial country estate at Wrest Park, near Bedford. Yorke was a young man of some literary ambition, both as a historian and a satirist; in the coming years he further developed interests in landscape gardening, architecture, natural philosophy, and scientific institutions. The Yorkes had a close and

affectionate marriage, and spent long periods together at Wrest in summer, where they entertained themselves with reading, outings, and historical *jeux d'esprit*.

The 'Weekly Letter' began following an exchange of letters between Birch and Yorke concerning several literary projects in the early 1740s. In December 1740, Birch facilitated the publication of Yorke's ironic historical essay on news writing in the Roman republic ('On the *Acta Diurna* of the *Old Romans*') in the annual preface to the Edward Cave's *Gentleman's Magazine*.²¹ Having acted as Yorke's London go-between or agent for this work, Birch subsequently corresponded with him on the composition, arrangement of material and printing of the *Athenian Letters* (1741-43), a collaborative historical prose fiction mostly written by Philip and his younger brother Charles Yorke, assisted by at least ten others, including Birch.²² The printing was organized by Birch, and undertaken by James Bettenham, who was instructed to print no more than 12 copies, all on fine paper, to be privately distributed to contributors by the Yorke brothers: in this sense it was merely printed but not published. Birch described himself as discharging 'the Functions of an Editor' in service to what Yorke called 'The Committee' of authors, including sending the 12 copies to the bookbinder in October 1741.²³

In the course of 1741, Birch began performing more literary services for Yorke. He adopted a regular habit of taking breakfast with Yorke, his wife and his brother on Mondays at their townhouse in St James's Square.²⁴ When Yorke was not in town, as he was for almost six months of every year, Birch wrote him a regular letter of intelligence. The letter summarized the political and literary events of the week: that is, all the intellectual activities of London Birch had witnessed, including books published and in press, lectures, events and dinners. Within its first month, Yorke praised Birch's letters written in this manner as a source of entertainment and information for his whole family:

I assure you that your letters are one of the most agreeable amusements of my Country Vacation; nor is it me alone they entertain, for both Lady Grey & my Brother take no small share in the pleasure they afford.²⁵

Birch's 'Weekly Letter' was sent to Yorke, but was widely respected and read within his family ménage, including here his brother Charles and his wife Jemima (referred to under her own title, Marchioness de Grey). Her interest in the letter reflected her uncommon education, with knowledge of French and Latin, and her wide reading in history and literature.²⁶ The Yorkes valued the intellectual capacity offered by letter writing. Yorke wrote:

Correspondence to most people, & upon most occasions, is a thing of form, or matter of business; in the first case rendered insipid by the very nature of ceremony, in the latter, disagreeable & irksome by the perplexities & difficulties, which occur upon such occasions; with you it is a relaxing of the mind in the most

ingenuous way communicating the fruits of one's studies, & speculations & repairing the loss of a friend's good company in the most effectual manner.²⁷

As this suggests, Yorke found that Birch's correspondence offered a continuation of sociability by other means. Yorke spoke of Birch continuing his 'very entertaining correspondence, which it is really a pleasure for me to sit down to'.²⁸

Sent regularly on Saturday, the 'Weekly Letter' continued from 1741 to 1766. Following the parliamentary calendar, Yorke went to the country, primarily to Wrest or his father's house at Wimpole, after the session broke up, leaving between March and June and usually returning in time for the negotiations before the new session began in September to November. This arrangement allowed a substantial correspondence, averaging 17 letters from Birch and 10 from Yorke each year (though in 1765 peaking at 29 Birch letters and 21 replies from Yorke). In format, Birch's 'Weekly Letter' was typically a four-page letter written on a half-folio sheet folded in two to create four pages (bifolium), occasionally extended by another bifolium, to five or six of potentially eight pages. It was sent as an enclosure, within an additional address sheet, and by the Yorke's weekly private carrier, although some were sent by post using Yorke's official frank. Evidence from Birch's surviving memorandum notebooks suggests that the letter was carefully composed and revised, and that the sent letter was a fine copy.²⁹ These notebooks show that Birch went to some effort to order his material, and to refine the distant and measured tone of his prose. Yorke's replies, by contrast, were shorter, and, with their numerous commands and queries, were composed in a clearly unrevised yet gentlemanly rhetorical style, suggesting a leisured writer at ease. Birch's letters were highly valued in the Yorke household, where they were preserved by being pasted in chronological order into specially prepared guard books kept in Yorke's closet at Wrest, a more private space than his splendid library.³⁰

The 'Weekly Letter' was restricted in circulation to those close to Yorke in the 'Hardwicke Circle'. Birch's letter was preserved in guard books in Birch's closet at Wrest, where it was read by members of his immediate family, including his wife Jemima Lady Grey, and his brothers Charles and James Yorke. Another member of the 'Hardwicke Circle' who read the 'Weekly Letter' was Daniel Wray (1701–1783), an antiquarian and Fellow of the Royal Society (elected 1729) who also performed literary duties for Yorke. Birch and Yorke encouraged Wray to act as an intelligencer, on Birch's model, from within his own London literary circles. In 1752, when Birch was away from London sojourning with the Yorkes at Wrest, Birch encouraged Wray to write a letter of information in his place. 'You know the Eagerness of our Curiosity here for what occurs in the Republic of Letters, for which reason you will furnish yourself before your Journey with such new Productions, as may deserve our perusal, or such an Account of them, as may be equivalent to the Works themselves'.³¹ Wray however resisted the attempts by Birch and Yorke to regulate his correspondence in the manner of the 'Weekly Letter'. Nonetheless, 54 letters from Wray to

Yorke, adopting a witty and gentlemanly tone of voice to describe his literary and antiquarian activities, in the period 1750-1759, are preserved in the Hardwicke Papers.³² Both the Birch and Wray letters circulated within the 'Hardwicke Circle', but no further. The 'Weekly Letter' received no further public dissemination until it entered the library of the British Museum after Birch's death.

Yorke described Birch's letter as a mixture of 'the occurrences of the literary with those of the political world.'³³ In general, the subject of Birch's letters ranged over political, scientific, and literary topics, usually in that order, with personal salutations to Yorke's family squeezed into a postscript. In its coverage of the 'political world', the letter offered information about foreign and domestic political developments, especially the conduct of military campaigns and alliances; current controversies and scandals; news of preferment and ejection from office; and the business of the forthcoming parliamentary session. The term 'literary', as used by Birch and Yorke, covered a wide range of intellectual activities, reflecting the etymological sense of the term in writing, study and learning. Birch was especially interested in giving notice of current and future publications, including those in preparation and in press. Amongst these he noted especially works of history, divinity and natural philosophy, but he also noted the publication of, and commented on, novels, plays and other entertainments. Controversial literature, especially pamphlets, periodical essays and newspapers were eagerly followed. Scientific journals, including Wetstein's *Bibliothèque Raisonnée*,³⁴ *Le Journal Des Sçavans*,³⁵ Maty's *Journal Britannique*,³⁶ and of course the *Philosophical Transactions*, were summarized in detail. Beyond the world of print, Birch also took notice of lectures at scientific institutions, some anniversary sermons, and events in the theatres, both of productions and news of the acting profession (although he does not seem to have attended the theatre). On a few occasions he also provided reports of experimental activity in natural philosophy, such as the *plein air* electrical research with 'a Body of Philosophers' at Blackheath in 1747.³⁷ The extended range of the 'Weekly Letter's' topics demonstrates how far the adaption of the newsletter metaphor aided Birch's reformulation of a scientific correspondence. The focus of the present article, however, is not the contents of the letter (proposed as the subject of further work), but a consideration of the intellectual enterprise of the letter as a whole.

Metaphors of correspondence

The nature of the 'Weekly Letter' can be understood in part by interrogating the terms used to describe it by Birch and Yorke. Self-reflexive descriptions of the enterprise — the 'control information' of their communication system — were most common immediately after its inception in the 1740s, where both correspondents used a complex range of terms, both allusive and metaphorical, to describe the letter and its habitual topics of curiosity. Often located in the opening salutations of their letters, Yorke and Birch's self-reflexive discourse negotiates the conduct of the correspondence, and the complex relationships of patronage and service that the letter instantiates. They both offered repeated

commendation of their exchanges, using commendation as encouragement and emotional compensation for their literary labour. The letter, Yorke maintained, provided considerable 'entertainment' to him: assuring Birch how 'agreeable & interesting your Letters are to me', that they gave 'so much entertainment' and 'the highest satisfaction'.³⁸ Mutual flattery and encouragement remained a consistent theme in managing the correspondence. Nonetheless, even though their enthusiasm for the letter was undiminished, this self-congratulatory discourse is less frequent by the 1750s, occurring most often at the annual inception of the letter. In the last decade of the letter, they clearly believed there was little need to negotiate or debate the nature of their correspondence, and the metaphors of the letter no longer command their curiosity and invention.

In the early months in 1741 and 1742, Birch described his letters as having two spheres: 'the State of the Literary World' and that of 'the Political one'.³⁹ Yorke praised Birch for imparting to his 'Correspondents both of literary & political speculations'.⁴⁰ Birch understood that one purpose of the 'Weekly Letter' was to keep Yorke informed about politics, reflecting Yorke's status as a Member of Parliament and as the son of the Lord Chancellor, as well as about 'literary' matters. Yorke repeatedly commented on the balance between the two, perceiving the balance of topics in the letter as an index to the balance of events in the world. Writing in 1748 (after the end of the War of the Austrian Succession) he noted that 'I see you are almost wholly confined to literary News, which is a good symptom as it portends quiet times'.⁴¹ In 1750, Birch complimented Yorke on the balance achieved in his letters: 'so agreeable a Melange of the domestic History of Wrest, your own Excursions, & foreign intelligence'.⁴² In August 1753, Yorke commented that the balance had swung too far in the direction of literary news: 'this Summer', he said, had been 'rather barren of News, owing in a great measure to the Scarcity of that Commodity, & yet Commercial Intelligence & the Bustle of Elections, might (one should imagine) afford you some political Articles'.⁴³ Admitting the justness of his remark, Birch commented that 'my late Letters have not abounded in articles of Intelligence: nor am I able to obviate the Objection at a time, which affords nothing else than eternal Echo's from all parts of Abuse upon the Jews, & those, who voted for them'.⁴⁴ Birch excused himself from reporting politics at that juncture, pleading that public debate in that season was almost wholly given over to the bad-tempered controversy on the Jewish Naturalization Act (26 Geo. II. cap. 26), a debate he found shrill and unenlightening.

Yorke especially valued Birch's reliability as a correspondent, noting 'the force of Custom' and 'the powerful attraction of your regular Correspondence'.⁴⁵ The weekly or hebdomadal plan of the letters generated the primary metaphor for the correspondence: Yorke took to calling Birch's letter 'your weekly Dispatches',⁴⁶ 'your weekly Letter',⁴⁷ or your 'weekly Epistles',⁴⁸ observing that its regularity gave both it and his week a distinct rhythm. 'We always expect' 'your weekly Dispatch' 'with some impatience, & desire the continuance of [it] at this juncture. A man of intelligence like you has a fine time of it, & your Advertisements cannot

be too frequent'.⁴⁹ The term dispatch suggested a written and official communication relating to public affairs, such as were carried by special messengers. Yorke praised Birch's ability to find adequate material for the letter — 'The Fertility of your Invention, & the Readiness of your Pen', he said, have 'sufficient exercise to digest the Occurrences of the Week into a Copious Dispatch',⁵⁰ observing that country life did not afford any reciprocal occurrences. In Paris in 1749, Yorke wrote that he was 'obliged to you for the Amusement it afforded me; you are never at a loss to fill your sheet, whether the Town be full or empty, whether the times are warlike or peacefull'.⁵¹ Writing to Jemima Yorke in his absence, Birch observed 'The Return of Saturday reminds me so strongly on the Duty I owe to Wrest, that I cannot excuse myself from the usual Tribute of my Correspondence, tho' your Ladyship might easily dispense with it'.⁵² Birch too noted the chronological patterning of his 'weekly Correspondence'.⁵³ In the first letter of 1750, Birch observed the powerful pull of custom and hebdomadal rhythm: 'Saturday's post has so strong a demand upon me when you are at Wrest, that tho' you left London but on Thursday I cannot forbear resuming my pen, & trying to fill my Sheet, according to Custom'.⁵⁴ Yorke also noted the almost metronomic weekly pattern of the correspondence: 'Your Letters are duly expected every Sunday's Post, & as duely arrive; like the Stage Coach man You set out to a Minute, & if a Piece of Intelligence comes to hand an hour after, It must stay for a passage to Silsoe, till the next weekly Packet'.⁵⁵ Silsoe was the nearest village to Wrest, a station on the weekly carrier's route from London to Bedford, on the historic Great North Road. These exchanges politely minimize the labour of Birch's undertaking, which is described as an 'exercise' or 'tribute'.

The steady hebdomadal rhythm of the 'Weekly Letter', and the mix of political and literary news, invited metaphors of the newspaper, and along with that, analogies between Birch and the role of journalist or newsmonger — as if he was a low and vulgar 'hack'. Birch described his own labours, with self-deprecating irony, as the 'the Industry of a dull Gazetteer' — one who writes in a gazette, a journalist.⁵⁶ Birch's location in London, the centre of the news business and the state intelligence apparatus, invited this comparison: it was described as his 'station of Intelligence' by Yorke,⁵⁷ and by Birch as the 'Centre of News',⁵⁸ and, in a more commercial register, 'this great Mart of public Intelligence'.⁵⁹ The rare occasions when Birch and Yorke referred to the 'Republic of Letters' was similarly marked by a pessimistic irony about the world of learning: it was 'a State', Birch said, 'which is never like to enjoy a thorough Tranquility, while the Appetite for Fame or Bread urges its members to constant Hostilities'.⁶⁰ Rather than a free and equal exchange of information, Birch found in the Republic of Letters vituperative, mercenary, and pedantic conflict.

As the 'Weekly Letter' accumulated, bound into multiple volumes, Yorke suggested it recorded 'the History of the Times',⁶¹ a name recalling higher forms of historical writing. Birch wrote of the desiderata of his letter as having the 'requisites of a good Historian'.⁶² When Birch wrote to Yorke in 1757, near the outset of hostilities of the conflict that came to be known as the Seven Years War

(1756-1763), he described the letter as 'my usual Quota of the History of the Week past',⁶³ although Yorke had already given his opinion that he had 'learnt from the Experience of the last war *to be sick of Modern History*'.⁶⁴ Given the curiosity about, and reliance on, state correspondence and newsletters in their own historical research and writing, Yorke and Birch could be relied upon to value this in their own correspondence. Birch's own historical and biographical writing and editing greatly valued the primacy of documentary evidence, especially the private or secret manuscript records of state correspondence networks.⁶⁵

The 'Weekly Letter', as its protagonists recognized, suggested numerous analogies with the seventeenth-century manuscript newsletter. Both Birch and Yorke were curious about the history of the newsletter, especially its form and administration, from their research on state papers. Yorke was sufficiently interested in the Paper Office — as both a repository of state papers and a semi-mythical zone of authority — to use his parliamentary influence to arrange a series of visits in 1746: there, he discovered, the archive was preserved in poor conditions, with many papers 'ill sorted, ill preserv'd & cover'd with dust', and others 'illegible from Damp'. Nonetheless, he observed how the papers were systematically organized, noticing how they were arranged into 'Classes under general Heads', which could be located against an catalogue, unfortunately 'not exact nor complete'.⁶⁶ Both Birch and Yorke had a high regard for letters, papers, and other archival documentary evidence, arguing only they provided the quality historical evidence. Birch argued, in the preface his *Historical View of the Negotiations between the Courts of England, France, and Brussels, from the Year 1592 to 1617* (written or compiled in 1748 and published in 1749), that 'the only true and unerring sources of history' were 'the original letters and papers of those eminent men, who were the principal actors in the administration of affairs'. By contrast, he argued, memoirs and histories, written by those involved in events they describe, were compromised by faction and bias. In 'original letters and papers', Birch argued, 'facts are represented in the most artless and undisguised manner, and in the order, in which they happened; and the secret springs, causes, and motives, which produced them, are opened to view'.⁶⁷ Birch's historical writing, such as his seven-volume folio edition of John Thurloe's seventeenth-century state papers, compiled from Thurloe's correspondence when he was secretary of the council of state of Oliver Cromwell, gave evidence of the high value he placed on newsletters as a source of evidence.⁶⁸

The 'Weekly Letter' reproduced many of the formal features of the scribal newsletter of the seventeenth century. Both Birch and Yorke developed metaphors and discursive analogies between the 'Weekly Letter' and its seventeenth-century antecedents, describing the letter using a series of archaic terms for newsletters common in the seventeenth century: 'paper of informations', 'aviso', 'a-la-main', and 'the paper office'. In 1744 Birch referred to a letter full of commissions from Yorke as a 'Paper of Informations',⁶⁹ adopting an archaic seventeenth-century legal phrase combining the notion of a document

(‘paper’) containing an item of news or intelligence (‘informations’). William Prynne’s extensive history of Archbishop Laud’s trial, published in 1646, for example refers to ‘a paper of informations’ used in evidence against him.⁷⁰ It was not a phrase current in the eighteenth century, but both correspondents enjoyed the historical irony. Yorke also referred to the letter as an ‘aviso’, an Italian word for a letter of intelligence or newsletter associated in Birch’s circle with seventeenth diplomatic correspondence. Yorke described to Birch in 1743 how he had ‘just perused your weekly *Avisi segreti* with great pleasure, but am sorry they brought no more decisive news. [...] I wish you could pick out a little, what is said to be going on behind the Curtain — we see enough of public appearances in the Papers.’⁷¹ As Yorke suggests, the connotation of *avis segreti* was access to secret knowledge concerning affairs of state, superior to that disseminated publically by the newspapers. Richard Flecknoe’s satire, ‘Character of a Common Newsmonger’, describes how the newsmonger or journalist picks up rumours and spreads them as true news in the gazettes (printed newspapers) and the coffee-houses, reserving for his ‘*Avisi segreti*, or secret Advice’ (manuscript newsletter) the most scandalous libels ‘defaming some Noble Persons, taxing of the State, or Rumours tending to Sedition’.⁷² Birch used the term ‘aviso’ in his *Historical View of the Negotiations*, where he described how Sir Robert Cecil wrote a confidential ‘aviso’, meaning here not only intelligence or news, but also advice and commentary, on French court politics on March 15 1597 at Angers (Birch clarifies that the aviso was ‘an account, by way of narration’).⁷³ In Paris in 1749, Yorke elaborated on the metaphor when he wrote that ‘My Lady writes me word that you have shewn your regard to the Paper Office at Wrest by continuing the Lines of your *Avisi* through her hands’.⁷⁴ By invoking the term ‘the Paper Office’, Yorke draws analogies between his own archive of letters in his closet at Wrest and the government office of the Secretaries of State that controlled the seventeenth-century newsletter system. Yorke further used the French term ‘alamain’ or ‘A-la-main’ to refer to the ‘Weekly Letter’: from Scotland in 1755, he asked Birch to ‘begin your usual *A La Mains* forthwith, for I am almost famish’d for want of Intelligence’,⁷⁵ and in 1760 wrote suggesting a topic ‘for a Saturday alamain’.⁷⁶ The term a-la-main was derived from the French expression ‘*Nouvelles à la main*’, meaning manuscript newsletters, used by French *nouvellistes* [newswriters].⁷⁷ Yorke had contracted with Rev. John Jeffreys in Paris in 1749 for a manuscript newsletter giving an account of French politics and literary affairs.⁷⁸ Over the following years, several different anonymous *nouvellistes* provided Yorke with Paris ‘*a-la-mains*’, among them, probably, Bousquet de Colomiers, a native of Toulouse.⁷⁹

Yorke underlined the historical analogies he saw between Birch’s letter and its seventeenth-century antecedents, when, in the course of praising the ‘Intelligence of various Kinds’ contained in the letters, he commented: ‘if you go on thus, I shall set you far above those illustrious Novelists your Predecessors, Mr Rowland White, Mr Chamberlain, & Master Garrard’.⁸⁰ By ‘Novelist’, Yorke means a retailer of novelty or news, a newsletter writer, a newsmonger or carrier of news (as recorded in the *OED*): a *nouvelliste* in French. Here he compares Birch to three

early seventeenth-century newsletter writers celebrated in contemporary historical scholarship, including Birch's own publications. Rowland White was a secretary and newsmonger for Sir Phillip Sidney in the period 1598-1600;⁸¹ Mr (later Rev.) George Garrard, master of the Charterhouse, was a gossip newsletter writer to Earl of Strafford, 1633-35;⁸² and John Chamberlain was a secretary in the household of Sir Dudley Carleton in the period 1598-1625.⁸³ The historical irony of Yorke's comparison of Birch with these secretary newsmongers is probably not lost on either man: each is a servant to a great nobleman, who through their successful prosecution of the business of the newsletter writer, grew to some fortune and some minor historical fame.

Adopting historical analogies to describe their relationship within the 'Weekly Letter' may have obviated some of its inequalities. For example, in 1745, Yorke described Birch as his 'Leiger in Town'.⁸⁴ The term 'leiger' or 'leger' was an obsolete term, current in the seventeenth century, describing an ambassador resident at a foreign court, of the highest rank, permanently representing his sovereign. Yorke may have picked it up from a seventeenth-century source, such as the historian Thomas Fuller's *Church-History of Britain* (1655),⁸⁵ or Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (1616).⁸⁶ The historicism, however ironic, both obviated social impediments, and celebrated a supposed continuity between their work and their subject. Birch's research in the seventeenth-century historical materials provided him with numerous and important examples of the secretary and other forms of trusted private servant in the households of the great men of state. Yorke, on several occasions in 1748, wrote letters imitating the courtly manner and elaborate diction of a seventeenth-century aristocratic statesman addressing his secretary.⁸⁷ Yorke's letter written on 28 June 1748, for example, is addressed 'Truly & well beloved, We greet you well'. Thereafter he jokingly issues a series of commissions and commands to Birch in the pompous mock-formal language appropriate to a great Lord addressing his feudal vassal (in fact the commissions were no more demanding than usual), using the majestic plural, archaic syntax, and ornate language. In the first, Yorke pressed Birch to make a research visit to 'the Archives of that faithfull & diligent Minister of State Secretary Nicholas' in Horseley.⁸⁸ The 'Nicholasian Archives', as Yorke grandiloquently called them, contained the papers of Sir Edward Nicholas (1593-1669), former Secretary of State under Charles I and II (1641-1662), who resided at West Horsley in Surrey.⁸⁹ Yorke was aware that among the personal papers of officers of state from this period were preserved records of the secret negotiations and deliberations of the court and ministry. He hoped that among Nicholas's personal archive might be minutes, letters and memorandums that would reveal the secrets of the Stuart court during the Civil War and in exile. Several letters in a row continue this mock formality, as Birch neglects to make the visit: 'The Obedience you have hitherto paid to our Royal Mandate has been so ready & punctual that we are willing to attribute this strange omission rather to forgetfulness than any premeditated & undutifull neglect'.⁹⁰ Birch's resistance to making the visit seemed to increase with every new pleading by Yorke,

repeatedly issued through 1748, although Birch did eventually visit the library in October 1750.⁹¹

The discourse of friendship, especially its contest with notions of service, provides a key context for understanding the social dynamic between Birch and Yorke. Yorke's ironic description of Birch as secretary, leiger, and agent hovered ambiguously between servant and friend. As Birch's historical researches showed, the term 'secretary' covered a wide range of positions and offices, from a 'privy servant' entrusted with private or secret matters, ranked just above the clerk or copyist, to a minister with governing functions, as in a Secretary of State. Here Birch's appointment as Secretary of the Royal Society, 1752-1764, is relevant too. In the seventeenth century, a secretary was increasingly employed to conduct correspondence, keep records, and transact business for his master. Early-modern advice books describe the mixture of trust, service and friendship found in the master-secretary relationship. A successful secretary was trusted with his master's secrets, and had access to his most private activities and spaces (particularly the closet); he was supposed to be obedient to his master's wish and command, like any servant; and yet he also had the trust and regard of the master, as if he was a friend.⁹² In this way, the discourse of friendship, especially its rhetoric of equality, became one of the central fictions of service in the early modern office of secretary.⁹³ The complex debts of mutual obligation and deference engendered in the 'Weekly Letter' between Yorke, master, patron, and nobleman, and Birch, secretary, agent and servant, gives insight into the role of friendship in eighteenth-century intellectual culture.

One of the most unusual aspects of the 'Weekly Letter' was its historical extent, running from 1741 to Birch's death in 1766. The chronological extent of the letter, and its place in the practice of their hebdomadal life, was a matter of no small pride to Birch and Yorke. At the beginning of the correspondence for the year 1760, Birch began by noticing the significant anniversary they had reached: 'the present Year', he said, 'if I misremember not, is the twentieth of our Correspondence'.⁹⁴ In reply, Yorke wrote that

The long Continuance of our Correspondence thro' such a Variety of political, literary & private Events, would furnish out a good Title Page Recommendation of it, if any future Collector should think it worth his while to lay before the criticising Public, what we only intended for our mutual Information & Amusement.⁹⁵

By imagining some future scholar wading through their 'Weekly Letter' as they have through Thurloe and others, Yorke celebrates the historicized success of Birch's epistolary project. They imaginatively reconstruct the 'Weekly Letter', an archaic imitation almost a century out of time, as an historical document before its time.

Conclusion

The 'Weekly Letter' both records and contributes to the rise of Birch and Yorke in the London intellectual firmament of the mid-eighteenth century. Birch's intellectual world had expanded out of the narrow circle of the Hardwicks, his own history writing, and the Thursdays club, to include more influential forms of intellectual labour. Through the patronage of the Hardwicks, father and son, he had found preferment in the church, and in key intellectual institutions of the period, including the Royal Society and the British Museum. Birch's rise gave evidence of Yorke's own increasing influence in London intellectual circles, including the Royal Society. The 'Weekly Letter' was an important conduit for the 'Hardwicke circle', as defined by Miller, and as such was 'highly congenial' to the Yorke view of history. Yorke and his followers were united by their 'cultural politics', Miller argues: 'Most members of the Hardwicke circle were literary, antiquarian and historical in their intellectual interests'.⁹⁶ The 'Weekly Letter' exemplified their systematic deployment of Whig principles in history, natural philosophy, and government, but was also an expression of their curious historicism, pedantism, and secrecy. The correspondence made an important contribution to the internal organization of the 'Hardwicke circle' within the Royal Society, giving Yorke privileged, organized and archived information about London activities in the political, literary, and scientific spheres. As such, the 'Weekly Letter' gives a unique insight into the Society's social and cultural history in the mid-century, even if it was not in itself a part of the institution's intellectual labours.

This article has shown how the controlling metaphors Birch and Yorke used to describe their correspondence shaped its role within the Royal Society and other intellectual networks in the period. Their conception of the 'Weekly Letter' adapted historical analogies and metaphors, derived from seventeenth-century news culture, scientific correspondence, and the *respublica litteraria*, to sustain its production over twenty-six years, and to negotiate the complex emotional bonds of service and friendship. These metaphors were not simply rhetorical, for Birch's 'Weekly Letter' possessed many features typical of both the seventeenth-century manuscript newsletter and the *commerce de lettres* in early modern scientific communication, such as regularity and extent, access to privileged insider knowledge, and legible markers of credibility. Yet it also had some distinctive features that were not typical of that model, not least its expanded field of topics, but also its attitude towards public knowledge. The 'Weekly Letter' was essentially a closed circuit, focusing on a discrete and secretive coterie around Yorke, dedicated to collecting and archiving private knowledge, especially that which might advantage their coterie. The preference for historical metaphors for epistolary labours celebrated the archaic culture of seventeenth-century correspondence, as practiced both by ministers of state and their secretaries, rather than the increasingly open model practiced by correspondent secretaries of scientific organizations, and by the editors of the 'science' journals, such as Wetstein or Maty, or even Birch himself, in relation to his work as Secretary for the *Philosophical Transactions*. The metaphors Birch and Yorke adopted to describe

their activities in the letter accordingly recall modes of secrecy and privacy inappropriate to an open and networked model of enlightenment science.

Notes

1. Correspondence of Philip Yorke, 2nd Earl of Hardwicke, with Rev. Thomas Birch, D.D., Secretary to the Royal Society, Hardwicke Papers, vols XLVIII-LII, British Library Add Mss 35,396-35,400. The term 'Weekly Letter' appears to have been coined in the only extant book-length treatment of Birch's life: Albert Edward Gunther, *An Introduction to the Life of the Rev. Thomas Birch D.D., F.R.S., 1705-1766* (Halesworth: Halesworth Press, 1984), pp. 45-46.
2. Yorke to Birch, Wimpole, Add Mss 35396, 7 October 1742, f. 75r; Yorke to Birch, Wimpole, 5 September 1742, Add Mss 35396, f. 54r.
3. Robert Harris, *A Patriot Press: National Politics and the London Press in the 1740s* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), p. 155; Richard Harding, *The Emergence of Britain's Global Naval Supremacy: The War of 1739-1748* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010), pp. 147-48.
4. David P. Miller, 'The "Hardwicke circle": the Whig supremacy and its demise in the 18th-century Royal Society', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society*, 52 (1998), 73-91 (p. 76).
5. Paul Dibon, 'Communication in the *Respublica Literaria* of the 17th Century', *Res Publica Litterarum*, 1 (1978), 43-55.
6. *The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Howard Anderson, Philip Daghljan, and Irvin Ehrenpreis. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1968).
7. Robert Boyle, *Correspondence of Robert Boyle*, ed. by Michael Hunter, Antonio Clericuzio, and Lawrence Principe, 6 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2001); Henry Oldenburg, *The Correspondence of Henry Oldenburg*, edited and translated by A. Rupert Hall and Marie Boas Hall, 13 vols (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965-1986); James Jurin, *The Correspondence of James Jurin (1684-1750), physician and secretary to the Royal Society*, edited by Andrea A. Rusnock (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996).
8. Stephen Pumfrey, 'The Scientific Revolution', in Michael Bentley (ed.), *Companion to Historiography* (London: Routledge, 1997), 293-306 (pp. 294-95); James McClellan, *Science Reorganized: Scientific Societies in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), esp. chapter 3.
9. Anne Goldgar, *Impolite Learning: Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680-1750* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 13-29 (p. 17).
10. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. by W. D. Halls (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 4.
11. Harold Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), pp. 10-15.
12. Joad Raymond (ed.), *News Networks in Seventeenth Century Britain and Europe* (London: Routledge, 2006); Ian Atherton, 'The itch grown a disease: Manuscript transmission of news in the seventeenth century', *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism*, 21:2 (1998), 39-65.

13. Peter Fraser, *The Intelligence of the Secretaries of State & Their Monopoly of Licensed News, 1660-1688* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), pp. 28-30; Alan Marshall, *Intelligence and Espionage in the Reign of Charles II, 1660-1685* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
14. Goldgar, *Impolite Learning*, p. 56.
15. Marie Boas Hall, 'The Royal Society's Role in the Diffusion of Information in the Seventeenth Century', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 29: 2 (March 1975), pp.173-192 (p. 177).
16. Michael Hunter, 'Promoting the New Science: Henry Oldenburg and the Early Royal Society', *History of Science*, 26:2 (June 1988), pp.165-181; Andrea Rusnock, 'Correspondence Networks and the Royal Society, 1700-1750', *The British Journal for the History of Science*, 32: 2 (June 1999), pp. 155-169
17. Arthur Herbert Church, *The Royal Society. Some account of the 'Classified Papers' in the archives. With an index of authors* (Oxford: Printed for the Author, 1907). I am indebted to Nydia Pineda for this reference.
18. On the historiography of the Royal Society in the eighteenth century, see David P. Miller, "'Into the Valley of Darkness": Reflections on the Royal Society in the Eighteenth Century', *History of Science*, 27:2 (June 1989), 155-66; Richard Sorrenson, 'Towards a History of the Royal Society in the Eighteenth Century', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 50: 1 (January 1996), 29-46.
19. Royal Society, Minutes of Council, 15 February 1752, Royal Society CMO/4, 49-53. See Christa Jungnickel and Russell McCormmach, *Cavendish* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1996), pp. 95-96. For a more critical account of Birch's work as an editor and archivist see Marie Boas Hall, 'Henry Miles, F.R.S. (1698-1763) and Thomas Birch, F.R.S. (1705-66)', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 18: 1 (June 1963), pp. 39-44.
20. Thomas Birch, *The History of the Royal Society of London for Improving of Natural Knowledge*, 4 vols (London: printed for A. Millar in the Strand, 1756-1757).
21. Philip Yorke, 'On the *Acta Diurna* of the *Old Romans*', *Gentleman's Magazine*, X, 1740, Preface, pp. iii-viii.
22. *Athenian letters: or, the epistolary correspondence of an agent of the King of Persia, residing at Athens during the Peloponnesian war. Containing the history of the times, in dispatches to the ministers of state at the Persian court*, 4 vols (London: printed by James Bettenham, [1741-43]).
23. Birch to Yorke, London, 29 August 1741, Add Mss 35396, f. 13r; Yorke to Birch, Wimpole, September 10, 1741, Add Mss 35396, f. 15v; TB to PY, London October 27 1741, Add Mss 35396, f. 35r.
24. 'Diary of Thomas Birch', Add Mss 4478C; Gunther, pp. 37-38.
25. Yorke to Birch, Wimpole, 20 September 1741, Add Mss 35396, f. 22r.
26. Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service, Lucas Archive: Jemima Yorke (Marchioness Grey), Correspondence with Catherine Talbot. L 30/9a/3-9 [1737-1770].
27. Yorke to Birch, Wimpole, 20 September 1741, Add Mss 35396, f. 22r.
28. Birch to Yorke, Wimpole, 1 October 1741, Add Mss 35396, f. 27r.
29. Private Accompt Books of Thomas Birch, 1727-1765: Memorandum book and diary combined; 1759-1761, Add. Mss 4471, ff. 143-156.

30. Yorke to Birch, Wrest, November 2 1749, Add Mss 35397, ff. 233-34.
31. Birch to Wray, Wrest, Oct 23 1752, Add. 4322, f. 109v.
32. Hardwicke Papers, Vol LIII, Add Mss 35401.
33. Yorke to Birch, 4 August 1747, Add Mss 35397, ff.64-65
34. *Bibliothèque raisonnée des ouvrages des savans de l'Europe* (Amsterdam: J. Wetstein, 1728-1753).
35. *Le Journal Des Sçavans* [Paris, from 1665 to 1828], later *Le Journal des Savants*. See Harcourt Brown, 'History and the Learned Journal', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 33:3 (1972), 365-378
36. *Journal britannique*, edited by Mattieu Maty (La Haye: Chez H. Scheurleer, 1750-1757).
37. Birch to Yorke, London, 15 August 1747, Add Mss 35397, ff. 70-71.
38. Birch to Yorke, London, 27 October 1741, Add Mss 35396, f. 35r.
39. Birch to Yorke, London, 29 August 1741, Add Mss 35396, f. 14v
40. Yorke to Birch, Wimpole, 5 September 1742, Add Mss 35396, f. 54r.
41. Yorke to Birch, Sugnall, 13 August 1748, Add Mss 35397, f. 143r.
42. Birch to Yorke, London, 18 August 1750, Add Mss 35397, f. 276r.
43. Yorke to Birch, Wrest, 23 August 1753, Add Mss 35398, f. 149r.
44. Birch to Yorke, 25 August 1753, Add Mss 35398, f. 151r.
45. Yorke to Birch, 14 October 1743, Add Mss 35396, f. 172r.
46. Yorke to Birch, Wimpole, 7 October 1742, Add Mss 35396, f. 75r, Yorke to Birch, 'Rest', 26 October 1743, Add 35396, f. 181r, Yorke to Birch, Grantham, 5 September 1744, Add Mss 35396, f. 247r; Yorke to Birch, Wrest, 19 September 1745, Add Mss 35396, f. 323r.
47. Yorke to Birch, 'Rest', 29 July 1744, Add Mss 35396, f. 229r.
48. Yorke to Birch, Wimpole, 19 September 1752, Add Mss 35398, f. 92r.
49. Yorke to Birch, Wrest, 12 June 1743, Add Mss 35396, f. 105r.
50. Yorke to Birch, 'Rest', 8 July 1744, Add Mss 35396, f. 218r.
51. Yorke to Birch, Paris, 30 September NS / 19 September OS, 1749, Add Mss 35397, f. 223r
52. Birch to Jemima Yorke, London, 22 July 1749, Add Mss 35397, f. 194r.
53. Birch to Yorke, London, 13 June 1747, Add Mss 35397, f. 43r.
54. Birch to Yorke, London, 19 May 1750, Add Mss 35397, f. 239r.
55. Yorke to Birch, Wrest, 28 June 1753, Add Mss 35398, f. 124r.
56. Birch to Yorke, London, 4 June 1743, Add Mss 35396, f. 98r.
57. Yorke to Birch, 'Rest', 27 May 1743, Add Mss 35396, f. 93r.
58. Birch to Yorke, London, 23 October 1742, Add Mss 35396, f. 77r.
59. Birch to Yorke, London, 10 August 1745, Add Mss 35396, f. 305r. See also Yorke to Birch, Wrest, 12 June 1744, Add Mss 35396, f. 199r.
60. Birch to Yorke, London, 29 June 1751, Add Mss 35398, f. 1r.
61. Yorke to Birch, Wrest, 2 November 1749, Add Mss 35397, f. 233v.
62. Birch to Yorke, London, 24 October 1747, Add Mss 35397, f. 95r.
63. Birch to Yorke, London, 29 October 1757, Add Mss 35398, f. 383r.
64. Yorke to Birch, Wrest, 29 September 1757, Add Mss 35398, f. 365r.
65. For an account of the historicism of Yorke's circle see Paddy Bullard, 'The Latitude of Whiggism: Tillotson, Burnet, and Lord William Russell in Whig

Historiography, 1675-1775', in *"Cultures of Whiggism": New Essays on English Literature and Culture in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. by David Womersley (Newark NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2005), pp. 299-329 (esp. 309-321); Rose Dixon, 'Chapter 2: Representations of Tillotson', in 'Sermons in Print: John Tillotson and Religious Publishing in England c.1660-1752 (unpublished PhD, Queen Mary University of London, 2009). See also Laird Okie, 'Birch and the Historians', *Augustan Historical Writing: Histories of England in the English Enlightenment* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991).

66. Thomas Birch, 'Abstract of Mr Yorke's observations on the Paper Office made in March 25th, 28th, April 2d, 15th, 19th, 22d, & May 2d, 25th, 29th, 1746', Add Mss 4244, ff. 31-36. Yorke's visit prompted his successful proposal for a new Paper Office.

67. Thomas Birch, *An Historical View of the Negotiations between the Courts of England, France, and Brussels, from the Year 1592 to 1617* (London: Printed for A. Millar, 1749), p. ix.

68. *A Collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe, Esq; secretary, first, to the Council of State, and afterwards to the two Protectors, Oliver and Richard Cromwell*, ed. by Thomas Birch, 7 vols (London: printed for the executor of the late Mr. Fletcher Gyles; Thomas Woodward; and Charles Davis, 1742).

69. Birch to Yorke, London, 9 June 1744, Add Mss 35396, f. 197r.

70. William Prynne, *Canterburies doome. Or The first part of a compleat history of the commitment, charge, tryall, condemnation, execution of William Laud, late Arch-bishop of Canterbury* (London: printed by John Macock for Michael Spark senior, 1646.)

71. Yorke to Birch, 'Rest', 19 June 1743, Add Mss 35396, f. 109r.

72. Richard Flecknoe, 'Character of a Common Newsmonger', in *Seventy eight characters of so many vertuous and vitious persons* (London: printed for publick use, 1677), p. 6.

73. Birch, *Historical View of the Negotiations*, p. 123.

74. Yorke to Birch, Paris, 29 August OS/September 9 NS 1749, Add Mss 35397, f. 206r

75. Yorke to Birch, Berwick, 15 and 21 July 1755, Add Mss 35398, ff. 256r.

76. Yorke to Birch, Sunning Hill, 22 July 1760, Add Mss 35399, f. 129v

77. Larry Bongie 'Les Nouvelles à la main: la perspective du client', in *De bonne main. La communication manuscrite au xviii^e siècle*, ed. by François Moureau (Paris: Universitas; Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1993), pp. 134-42.

78. Rev. John Jeffreys (b. 1718) was chaplain to the French embassy of Lieutenant-General Willem Anne van Keppel, 2nd Earl of Albemarle (1702-1754), in Paris from 1749 to 1754.

79. Yorke 'a-la-mains' supplied by Rev. Dr John Jeffreys while resident in Paris, Add Mss 35445. John Rogister, *Louis XV and the Parlement of Paris, 1737-1755* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 267.

80. Yorke to Birch, Wimpole, 22 September 1747, Add Mss 35397, f. 77r.

81. Numerous letters between White and Sydney were printed in 1746 'from the originals at Penshurst Place in Kent, the seat of the Earls of Leicester, and from his Majesty's Office of Papers and Records for Business of State' in Arthur Collins, *Letters and memorials of state [...] Written and collected by Sir Henry Sydney, [...]*

- The famous Sir Philip Sydney, and his brother Sir Robert Sydney* (London: printed for T. Osborne, in Gray's-Inn, 1746). The letters formed the basis of Birch's biography of Sir Walter Raleigh, *The works of Sir Walter Raleigh, Kt. political, commercial, and philosophical* (London: printed for R. Dodsley, at Tully's Head in Pall-Mall, 1751).
82. Thomas Wentworth, earl of Strafford, *The Earl of Strafforde's Letters and Dispatches: With an Essay Towards His Life*, ed. by William Knowler, and George Radcliffe (Dublin: Printed by R. Reilly [...] for Robert Owen, 1740). Birch made transcripts of the printed text, in 'Memorabilia in the Earl of Strafford's letters', Add 4205, ff. 1-47.
83. Letters of John Chamberlain to Sir Dudley Carleton and others; 1598-1625. Copied by Birch from the originals then in the State Paper Office, Add 4173-4175.
84. Yorke to Birch, Wrest, 5 September 1745, Add Mss 35396, f. 316r.
85. Thomas Fuller, *The church-history of Britain; from the birth of Jesus Christ, untill the year 1648* (London: printed for Iohn Williams, 1655), p. 71.
86. 'Intends you for his swift Ambassador, / Where you shall be an euerlasting Leiger', William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure* (1623) iii. i. 55.
87. Yorke letters using the mock salutation 'Truly & well beloved, We greet you well' were sent on: 28 June 1748, Add Mss 35397, ff. 123-24; 7 July 1748, ff. 129-30; 11 July 1748, ff. 133-34.
88. Yorke to Birch, [Wrest], endorsed TB '28 June 1748', Add Mss 35397, f. 123r.
89. Donald Nicholas, 'Note on sources', *Mr. Secretary Nicholas (1593-1669): his life and letters* (London: Bodley Head, 1955), p. 328.
90. Yorke to Birch, Wrest, 7 July 1748, Add Mss 35397, f. 129r.
91. Birch to Yorke, London, 6 October 1750, Add Mss 35397, ff. 300-01; Birch, 'Extracts of the State Papers and letters of Sr Edward Nicholas, Secretary of State to the King Charles I and II', 1750-51, Add Mss 4180.
92. Vanessa Smith and Richard Yeo, 'Friendship in Early Modern Philosophy and Science', *Parergon*, 26:2 (2009), pp. 1-9.
93. Alan Stewart, *Close Readers: Humanism and Sodomy in Early Modern England* (Princeton, N.J. and Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 170-76; Brandon Christopher, "'Associate of our labours': Ben Jonson's *Sejanus* and the Limits of Master-Secretary Friendship', *The Ben Jonson Journal*, 19:1 (2012), pp. 105-126.
94. Birch to Yorke, London, 19 July 1760, Add Mss 35399, 127r.
95. Yorke to Birch, Sunning Hill, 22 July 1760, Add Mss 35399, 129r.
96. Miller, 'The "Hardwicke Circle"', p. 81.

Short-title for page headings: 'Birch's "Weekly Letter"'

Illustration caption:

James Wills (d. 1777), 'Portrait of Thomas Birch' (1737), oil on canvas (91.8x71.2cm), The Royal Society: Image No. RS.9643. Reproduced with permission, © The Royal Society.